

"WANTED: SHAPERS OF CHANGE"

TEXT: "To sense the flow of a changing environment...
and shape it"

INTRODUCTION I put these words before you this morning in the way of a text. The text is not from the Bible, as you probably realize it. It is from the front of a promotional brochure of one of the social agencies of our city. "To sense the flow of a changing environment....and shape it". These words have been turning over in my mind in recent days as I have thought about the problems of society, the mission of a church like ours, and especially the educational ministry of our church which gets under way next Sunday - how we plan and carry it out.

DEVELOPMENT Some of us heard Ramsey Clark speak last Spring over at the Stanley Issacs Community Center. It was the annual meeting of the United Settlement Houses. He made the claim (and I think it copied it correctly) that in a very few years:

"the main challenge to our society will not turn around the production of goods, but around the difficulties and the opportunities involved in a world of accelerating change and ever widening choices....so swift is the acceleration that trying to 'make sense' of change will be our basic industry".

If this is true, if this is where we're headed, then 'making sense' of change must also be a primary concern of the Christian Church. I think that helping people of all ages understand themselves in the midst of change will be the church's way of equipping people for a full and abundant life.

Wanted: shapers of change. Where shall we begin? Who is qualified to be a shaper of change? John Gardner, head of the Urban Coalition and formerly the Secretary of HEW, wrote something recently that puts us on the right track.

"We shall renew neither ourselves, nor our society, nor a troubled world unless we share a vision of something worth saving!"

Here's a place to begin then. A vision of something worth saving. As people of faith, we know its truth for it comes to us from the pages of the Old Testament: "Where there is no vision, the people perish".

And from many sides we hear that as a nation, a society of people, we have lost sight of what we're all about. To an extent, I fear it's true - I also feel that what this world, this nation, the Christian Church - our church, too - what is most needed is a vision. And if we are to find "shapers of change" to work in our church school, for instance, and in the church's broader ministry, we must discover men and women of vision - who have a vision about the world, God's activity in it, and the role of the church in equipping people for service in the world. Suppose we look at this vision in its separate parts.

FIRST: SEEING WORLD IN DIFFERENT WAY First off: I believe that "shapers of change" need to have a vision of seeing the world in a different way.

For the last two hundred years or so, we have seen the world as a mass of land divided into continents and into countries. Such a view of the world now

is going out of style, fast becoming an anachronism. I couldn't help but think of this this past week as we witnessed the exciting opening of the 26th Session of the General Assembly of the UN. What we need to promote is a vision that sees the whole of the earth as a world community.

Several summers ago I performed a wedding for two people who saw this vision and had come to act upon its meaning in their lives. Both had done graduate study here in the States. The young man was from Wales and his bride was an Australian of Greek ancestry. Soon after the wedding the couple left for Japan where the groom was to be employed by a research firm with home office in West Germany. The bride was to work for a business in Japan with home offices in California. In a world where things like this take place, most of us need a vision of the world that includes the whole earth.

Looking at the world in this different way has an objective. Seeing the world as a total community means that the discoveries and the insights of one region of the world become the properties and the rights of all people - everywhere. Arnold Toynbee, the British historian, says:

"Our age will be remembered not for its horrifying crimes or astonishing inventions, but because it was the first generation since the dawn of history to believe it practical to make the benefits of society available to the whole human race".

Fortunately, this is a vision that has been caught by many people - and not all of them under thirty. Such people are saying to us that in a technological and scientific age poverty is primarily caused by national and regional selfishness. They are asserting and rightly so that more and more people can and should share in the abundance of the earth's riches. They are on the right track, I believe, when they say to governments, businesses, institutions, even as they remind the church that the whole of mankind is worth saving.

A new way of life is emerging and opening up - different from anything man has known in the past. The old cocoons that enclosed man in a region, a nation, or a continent doing toiling labor are no more. Agriculture, for instance, as a way of life is fast disappearing, even in underdeveloped lands. Manual labor in industry is giving way to increased automation. All this means that the type of efforts man applies himself to in the future are going to be different. And to be ready for the different age man must have a vision of the world that is ready and willing to explore the potentialities of man to its outermost bounds. We simply do not yet know what man is capable of becoming.

Thank God for the growing vision that many have - the vision of a different world in which we can concentrate our resources and our energies upon finding ways of developing all mankind to its fullest potential. Our prayers are very much with those of you who counsel together in these days at the United Nations. The world does care what happens there on these pressing issues of the 26th General Assembly. First: a vision of the entire earth as a world community where all men are brothers, members of the family of man.

SEEING GOD IN THE MIDST OF CHANGE

In addition to seeing the world in a different way, shapers of change need a second vision: seeing God at work in the midst of change.....somewhere in all that is happening in today's world, God is at work bringing about and creating order and meaning.

At the outset of this second point, we need to recognize that this is not easy for many people to see and acknowledge - even people who profess to be followers of Jesus Christ. Many there are who simply do not understand how God can be at work in these turbulent and tense times with all of its seeming chaos and disorder. Perhaps part of our blindness to God's activity in the world has been brought about by certain conditions. Let me carry this a step further.

I think that as religion has been practiced by the majority of Americans for the past generation or more, perfection for human life has been described in terms of the fixed, the stable, the unchanging. It has led many to believe that God speaks mainly through the "still, small voice of calm" - and only on rare occasions does he lift his voice and roar through the "earthquake, wind or fire". In short, religion as it has been practiced and taught for most of us has often looked for the "peace of God" as some sort of quiet, tranquil state of euphoria. The time has come, however, for a different view of God's work in the world. If the people of God are to shape changes in the world we must see Him in the flux of life as well as in the calm and quiet.

I'm told there is a delightful spot in the mountains of North Carolina known as "Sliding Rock". I've never been there; perhaps some of you have. I've only heard a bout it. They say that during the Summer months, thousands of people go there to enjoy the cool stream, see the rapids, and, if they're brave enough - to slide down the slippery rock into the pool below. They say that if you go to "sliding rock" you'll be impressed by the exuberance and joy of people of all ages who slide down this long slope, dive into the pool and come out splashing - cool, refreshed and eager to repeat the experience.

But, I understand - not everyone slides. Always there are large numbers of people who dress up for the occasion and wade through the mountain stream down to the beginning of the slope. For hours they remain there - crouched - looking as if they'd give anything to enjoy the experience they see the other having. But instead of sliding, they simply glue their fingers in the crevices of the rocks and hold on for dear life!

It's interesting to watch people leave "sliding rock". On the one hand there are those who dared to slide. They climb the hill to the parking lot tired from the physical activity, but renewed and joyful from their victory over the struggle of the rapids. There are also those who held tightly to the rocks. They leave defeated, tired, emotionally drained. Clinging gave them a sense of safety and security, but in the end it led to exhaustion - futility - personal defeat.

The point is this: what we need today are some shapers of change who are able to trace God's hand at work in the world renewing the spirits of men as they brave the rapids. God's at work, I believe, in the turmoil and change if we but have a vision to see Him. More and more we heard about human values as over against property values. More and more we hear about adequate housing, education, health care for all people. More than hearing about such things people now are uniting to see that governments, businesses and institutions made provision for all people to have these benefits regardless of income. We hear more and more about the dangers of pollution - of water and of air - of devices to counter it all. We have heard about talk of a world university under the auspices of the UN. And who knows, enough people - if enough people - become concerned about the problem, there may be hope of improving our outdated penal system and avoiding future Atticss.

Where is God in the midst of these struggles? I think he is on the side of the forgotten, the neglected, the oppressed of his people. He's with the men and

women who, though weary from battling in the rapids with an indifferent society, serve their fellowman by improving human conditions - making life more abundant - which is to say, filled with more self-respect, dignity and regard for one's fellowman.

And seeing God at work in the "rapids" of life is very consistent with our faith. Abraham knew not where he was to go, but he followed instructions and became the founder of a people whose mission was to serve God. Moses led the oppressed Hebrews through some rapids, into an unknown, but free land. The prophets admonished their people to return to the Lord by extending justice, love and mercy to all. And Christ - whose name we have taken for our own - went out with "nowhere to lay his head" - out of a deep concern for the poor, the captives, the oppressed. Shapers of change - such need to have a vision of God at work, always as in the spirit of Christ - making men free and whole.

SEE THE CHURCH IN A DIFFERENT WAY

Now we're rounding third base and heading for home. Let me put one other vision that shapers of change need to have in mind, and this one relates to the church.

They need to see the church in a different way. For generations the church has thought of itself in terms of permanence and we've used words to describe it that suggest certain images: "foundation" - "rock" - "fortress" - "cornerstone". Hour hymns carry these words as you know. I love these words as much as the next person, but in these times of change these words are passive, static. People living in the midst of these dynamic changes do not respond to these images. They see an institution that uses such words to describe itself as being big, unresponsive, insensitive to people and their needs, as belonging to another time place, era, and they want not part of it. Am I right? Is this the reading you get?

Perhaps we need to look for other images to convey the mission of the church in this time. Perhaps something like a space ship. For in this space age, movement is in relation to moving and changing points rather than fixed points. To get to the moon, as most youngsters can tell us, astronauts had to be launched in motion from a moving platform. We need people who see the church in this way: as something of a launching pad, not as a fortress protecting us from life, nor a ship anchored in port away from the storms of life, but as a launching pad a place where we go with regularity for the refreshment of the spirit, the renewal of vision, the refueling of spiritual energy for mission out there in the space of the weekday.

I believe that the church of the future must exist - not as a little haven from the ideas and stress of the world, but more as a re-charging station where one comes to understand the content of his faith, and is reminded of his dignity and stature as a child of God, and hears the calling of God in his life and then departs to serve in the world.

RETURN TO OUR TEXT

And so we return to the topic of the morning and the text: "To sense the flow of a changing environment....and shape it". Yes - we need shapers of change, if we're going to go the job that faces us. There remains a critical gap between the vision and the reality and that's the gap that you must cross - a gap between individual profession and practice, between our church as she now is and the church she can and must become.

We need people to have a vision of a world community, where all are brothers. We need people to have a vision of God at work in the midst of change. We need for you to catch a glimpse of a church that is moving with the time and meeting the challenge of this new day. ~~Who will be a shaper of change.~~ Those who would

choose to shape rather than accomodate change may reach us any time after the service and through the coming week. Mind you, we still need teachers who love children and are willing to share this vision with them. We need a congregation of people committed to the future of this church - willing to get in there and make a difference. We need a lot of prayer. I place three questions on your heart and hope you will carry them out of here with you:

If not me - whom?
If not now - when?
If not here - where?

PRAYER: O God, Our Father - Fzther of all mankind - grant us a vision equal to our time, and the strength equal to the tasks before us. Make of us a church equal to her mission. In the spirit of Christ. Amen